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SUBJECT: SERBIA: PRIDE PARADE CANCELLED AS GOVERNMENT LOSES NERVE

REF: BELGRADE 207

Summary

¶1. (SBU) Organizers for the September 20 Belgrade Pride Parade reluctantly cancelled the event at the last minute after the government, citing security concerns, banned the event at its desired location and proposed what the organizers deemed unacceptable alternative venues. Although government officials argued that this Solomonic decision prevented bloodshed and destruction of property, the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community and its supporters in civil society maintained that the government effectively capitulated in the face of threats by right-wing nationalist organizations and soccer hooligans. The fierce rhetoric against the event and the collective sigh of relief when the event was cancelled clearly demonstrated that Serbia failed to pass an important litmus test for tolerance and the value system promoted by the law against discrimination adopted in March. Of equal concern is that these developments once again underlined the broader unwillingness of the government to move from declaratory words of support to decisive action. End Summary.

Parade "Approved" for Socialist-Era Location

¶2. (SBU) Although parade organizers announced their intentions several months in advance, contracted a local security expert to provide an assessment of risks associated with the event, and finalized a date in July, the government and its ministries developed a severe case of cold feet as September 20 approached. In a series of meetings with the organizers during the week before the event, government and police officials attempted to persuade the LGBT community to cancel, postpone, or move the parade to a different location. While Interior Minister Ivica Dacic announced publicly that the police were prepared to protect parade participants, he repeatedly termed the event "one of the riskiest ever," playing into a media frenzy that significantly ratcheted up tensions. During a chance encounter on September 17, Minister for Labor Rasim Ljajic and Security Information Agency head Sasa Vukadinovic told us that the government was concerned about violence and the ability of 4,000 policemen to protect 200-500 Pride participants from attacks by 10,000 hooligans, but stressed that the government was determined to protect the event. However, Ministry for Human and Minority Rights State Secretary Marko Karadzic (strictly protect) told us on September 16 that it was his distinct impression that the government did not want the parade to take place and that his own Minister had censured him for

contacting Pride organizers.

¶3. (SBU) During a meeting on the morning of September 19, Prime Minister Mirko Cvetkovic passed parade organizers a decision, signed by Director of Police Milorad Veljovic, that the authorities could not guarantee the safety of participants at the originally proposed location, a plaza in central Belgrade. Instead, the government, evidently based upon a recommendation by the Interior Ministry, "approved" holding the event in either Usce park or outside the Palace of Serbia in New Belgrade. Parade organizers interpreted this recommendation as a de facto ban on their original plans and cancelled the event. They argued that holding the parade in an alternate location would defeat the purpose of Pride events worldwide, which is to demonstrate that sexual minorities can freely enjoy their rights, and that the government's decision undermined their confidence that the authorities could provide protection for participants even at an alternate location.

Late Government Reaction Emboldened Nationalists

¶4. (U) The government's lukewarm attitude in the run-up to the parade provided ample opportunity for opponents ranging from

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extremist organizations to the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) to express their opposition. Right-wing, nationalist organizations such as the Serbian Popular Movement 1389, Obraz, and Nasi openly threatened violence against the participants, with Obraz leader Mladen Obradovic repeating for Politika and B92 the group's message spray-painted throughout Belgrade: "Cekamo Vas" (We are waiting for you). Representatives of 1389 sent a letter to the press offering to buy close-up photographs of parade participants for future posting online so that "parents will be able to recognize sexually deviant persons and protect their children from this harmful influence." The acting head of the SOC Metropolitan Amfilohije of Montenegro and the Coastlands called the event "the Shame Parade, the Parade of Sodom and Gomorrah," while Holy Synod member Bishop Irinej of Backa issued a statement emphasizing that, as during the March debate on the law against discrimination (reftel), the SOC and other "traditional" religious communities "oppose the right to public expression of sexual orientation, especially when it violates the right of citizens to privacy, family life, religious beliefs, and the inviolability of personal dignity."

¶5. (U) On September 17, prodded by Interior Minister Dacic's criticism that the state could not remain silent on such an important political issue, the government took a public stance on the parade at its weekly cabinet meeting. In part, its statement announced that "it was concluded that state institutions must guarantee the free expression of individuality and diversity. Serbia is a democratic state with high standards of human rights, and it is the right of every citizen to express his constitutional freedoms. The government calls on citizens to respect the Constitution and democratic values by not disrupting public order and peace and not threatening the safety of other citizens."

¶6. (U) President Tadic followed suit, issuing a public statement on September 18. Referring both to the Pride Parade and to an incident in which supporters of the Partizan soccer team attacked and seriously injured a French citizen, President Tadic emphasized that the state would react to violence and would not allow an atmosphere of chaos to be created. The president then declared that the government would do everything in its power to protect citizens, regardless of their ethnic, religious, sexual, or

political orientation, denouncing those who would resort to threats or violence or take justice into their own hands and thereby jeopardize the lives of those who think differently or are different.

Common Sense or Capitulation?

¶17. (U) In the aftermath of the parade's cancellation, government officials worked quickly to spin the outcome as a disappointing but necessary development. Appearing on B92's popular weekly talk show Impression of the Week on September 20, Justice Ministry State Secretary Slobodan Homen told the host that "common sense had triumphed," while expressing hope that through "step-by-step" progress such an event could be held in the future. Human and Minority Rights Minister Svetozar Ciplic argued in vain on the same show that the government had not lost its showdown with extremist elements but rather that "we [the government and parade organizers] simply bowed out from the test." Homen announced that his ministry intended to propose a ban on organizations that advocate violence, and the police on September 20 arrested 37 people, including Obraz leader Obradovic and 1389 leaders Misa Vacic and Radojko Ljubicic, for violating a ban on public gatherings when they sought to assemble in downtown Belgrade to "celebrate" Pride's cancellation. However, despite strong police presence in downtown Belgrade, supporters of right-wing groups managed to walk down the main pedestrian street and to the St. Sava church.

¶18. (U) In contrast, the vast majority of civil society, human rights defenders, and progressive political parties decried the parade's cancellation as a symbol of the government's weakness. The Lawyers' Committee for Human Rights (YUCOM) and Social Democratic Union characterized developments as capitulation of the state, while the NGO Forum for Security and Democracy issued a statement in which it asserted that "postponement of the Pride Parade is above all a new and strong wind blowing at the sails of

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all those formal and informal groups to whose darkness and backwardness there has been no answer since the day of [former Prime Minister] Zoran Djindjic's assassination." The Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) stated that this turn of events should motivate all of society to join in the battle for the victory of freedom over fear and terror, and the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia equated cancellation with Serbia's inability to distance itself from chauvinistic forces in society and with the latest in series of developments demonstrating the weakness of the current government.

Comment

¶19. (SBU) Despite Serbian officials' game effort to portray their role in the cancellation of the Belgrade Pride Parade as the only rational course of action in face of legitimate threats of violence, the reality is that this decision again demonstrated the government's lack of leadership in the face of difficult issues. It was not the first time that a government which identifies itself with European values chose to take the easy way out rather than confront a real or imaginary bogeyman. Instead of taking a decisive and courageous stance in support of freedom, the government limited itself to belated declarations of support and allowed extremist groups to dictate state policy. End Comment.

PEDERSON